

From Hand-held to Haunt-held: “Lesbian Continuum” Meets “Infection in the Sentence” in Emily Carroll’s Comics

Christina Dokou

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Abstract

The article examines two works by Canadian (web)comics artist Emily Carroll, “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold” (2014) and “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter” (2011) in relation to a pair of second-wave feminism concepts, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “infection in the sentence” (from the 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic*) and Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum” (from her 1980 “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”). What the analysis shows is that the two conditions of woman-identified relationships are not mutually exclusive, as it might be inferred from their definition and critical juxtaposition so far, but may actually be modalities of the same situation, depending on the variable of actual unmediated affection between two women. The article also focuses on how Carroll’s artistic innovations, transplanted from webcomics technology onto the printed page within the wider context of the new expressive possibilities cultivated by the hybrid enunciatory apparatus of sequential art, eloquently depict this continuum in both its infected and beneficent versions, visualizing the diachronically-relevant mechanics of this complex process of woman-to-woman identification.

Keywords: Emily Carroll, (web)comics, “lesbian continuum,” “infection in the sentence,” revisionist fairy-tale.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i4.7916>

An invisible thread ties two of the most seminal texts to come out of second-wave feminism, namely Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay (and 1981 book) *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*: it is the idea that relationships between women, albeit marginalized or eroded by patriarchy, have a decisive influence in the formation of feminine identity. This idea, self-evident though it might seem to some, actually runs both complementary *and* counter to the other realization that women form their feminine consciousness by mirroring almost exclusively masculine heteronormative desire.¹ Woman-identified bonds, in other words, form a discourse that challenges the script of the phallogocentric Symbolic² with the potential for raising women’s awareness of their condition.

¹ As argued, among other texts, by Luce Irigaray in *Speculum and the Other Woman*. Cornell UP, 1985, and by Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1 no. 4. The U of Chicago P, 1976, pp.857-893.

² I choose Jacques Derrida’s 1978 coinage of the term phallogocentrism (20)—as opposed to merely phallocentrism, the ideology of patriarchy built upon the privileging of the phallus—because I wish to emphasize the way this patriarchal ideology informs meaning-making and cognition on both a conscious and an unconscious level (also alluded to by reference to Jacques Lacan’s Symbolic Order), in the same way as the fusion of images and words do in the comics medium.

Such awareness, however, is not always felicitous: it may equally generate nurturing empowerment or hopelessness and discontent. On the one hand, according to Chapter 2 of Gilbert and Gubar's treatise, a female artist's realization of the fate of her foremothers—women whose work was silenced, vilified, destroyed, and they themselves were driven to obscurity, ignominy, and/or madness—functions as an “infection in the sentence” (52) that “breeds” in the contemporary woman artist bitterness, rage, and despair as regards her own prospects in a male-dominated society, as well as “loneliness” (49) within an artistic canon comprised of male icons. As Gilbert and Gubar are careful to note, while there is indeed a “matrilineal heritage of literary strength” that can nurture aspiring women (59), the trouble lies with the phallogocentric dismissal of female achievement that is established as cultural “truth” (49-50). Hence,

In comparison to the “male” tradition of strong, father-son combat . . . this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary “fathers” of patriarchy to all their “inferiorized” female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a dis-ease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women, especially—as we shall see in this study—throughout literature by women before the twentieth century. (51)

On the other hand, Rich identifies bonds formed between women—be they kin, friends, mentors, or lovers—as a “lesbian continuum” that nurtures and empowers women in their quest for fulfilment and identity in general:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear in it such associations as *marriage resistance* and the “haggard” behavior identified by Mary Daly . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbianism.” (648-649)

A lesbian herself, Rich sees lesbian relationships as paradigmatic of a pure female amity, one in which neither masculine signifying desire nor the sociological dictates of heterosexual propagation intervene, and hence a particularly strong, resistant kind of woman-identified bond.

The above would suggest that the two outcomes in such relationships are mutually exclusive, the effort of course being to avoid the infection and inhabit the beneficial continuum instead. However, I would argue that these two effects potentially operate simultaneously within a given situation, with the prevalence of one or the other depending on variables, such as the degree of

awareness of the other in the “lesbian” bond, that is, the existence of actual affection and direct affinity between women.

To illustrate this, I will use the work of Canadian webcomics creator and videogames artist Emily Carroll, who “drew her very first comic in May 2010,” namely a webcomic Halloween horror story titled “His Face All Red”³ and, “[t]hirteen months later ... won the Joe Shuster Award for Outstanding Web Comics Creator” (Collins). Although Carroll’s primary fan-base came from a “significant and growing market” (Kashtan 4) of webcomics and video-games, her big break in the graphic novel world came in 2014, with the publication of her first collection of gothic fairy-tales, titled *Through the Woods*. Carroll’s skills as a gripping storyteller and captivating illustrator/inker have won her already thirteen prestigious awards and the acclaim of both fellow artists and readers, particularly for the innovations she introduces on comics conventions: Sarah Horrocks notes that *Through the Woods* contains “spellbound stories through which every strength of the comics medium is put into employ. There are frankly very few writers in comics who can go toe-to-toe with Emily Carroll in this regard. The totality of these comics is a testament to the largely untapped potentials inherent in this medium,” while three-time Eisner Award-winner Craig Thompson lauds her work as “a Victorian gothic playground haunted by Mary Shelley & Edward Gorey, awash in the dream-like haze of Odilon Redon, and composed with the poetic elegance of Ukiyo-e.”

Carroll’s work comprises mainly a number of artistically imaginative, Gothic twists upon classic fairy tales, or “period pieces,” which “have a distinctly fairy tale-esque approach” (Schedeen). This of course brings to mind prior efforts by female artists to revamp children’s stories, notably, Anne Sexton’s 1971 *Transformations*, Angela Carter’s 1979 *The Bloody Chamber*, and Barbara Walker’s 1996 *Feminist Fairy Tales*. Indeed, like those literary foremothers, Carroll, herself a lesbian activist, uses horror—a favorite vehicle for lesbian literature, according to Paulina Palmer—to destabilize the phallogocentric Symbolic and highlight issues about non-conforming women whose existence lies buried in patriarchy’s substratum. Given that “[l]ike fairytales or folklore, horror, good horror, translates well and has a timeless quality” (Silva), the combination of the two becomes a great vehicle for social commentary on contemporary gender politics. As Christina Dokou notes, almost all the stories in *Through the Woods* “concern women”—specifically girls going through adolescence or a nubile young lady facing the anxieties of new sexuality—“thus ensconcing themselves well within the Gothic *topos* of linking monstrosity to both femininity and psychological states of extreme stress that blur the line between the familiar and the uncanny” (574).

The choice of the fairy-tale genre is not random either, because, as the artist says, “they evoke a visceral emotional reaction that I’m not even sure why it’s so unsettling” (Hubbard 2), and have an inherent capacity for challenging cultural dicta: “I think a lot of fairy tales have that sort of unease built into them, just because they introduce so many elements that they never explain, and use fairy tale logic—the kind that isn’t really logic at all, but has that matter-of-fact

³ Available at emcarroll.com/comics/faceallred/01.html

feel to it anyway—and the reader just has to roll with it” (Carroll qtd. in Collins). Thus, Carroll’s use of fantasy allows for a more directly abstract, archetypal look into the mechanics of the lesbian continuum.

Apart from the genre, the medium chosen for this retelling is equally significant. Superhero comics constitute a new mythology for the Western world, playing host to all of the archetypal patterns of earlier folklore. Furthermore, comics and graphic novels have recently emerged as a link between traditional reading habits and new technologies of representation in print, since they, being autographic⁴ and therefore irreducible, constitute a genre “even more curiously resistant to replacement by digital equivalents than other genres of books, despite its extreme marginality within the American book industry in general, and may therefore offer valuable lessons about the continuing role that printed books might play in a digital age” (Kashtan 3). Comics feature, as experts acknowledge, a new, significantly powerful hybrid language to suit our image-oriented culture, where form is as significant as content (Chute 1016). “Perceptual theorist Ann Marie Seward Barry, more optimistic about the visual turn of our culture, asserts that ‘it is images, not words, that communicate most deeply’” (75) and that “visual information is holistic, immediate, and empirically grounded” (116)” (Varnum & Gibbons ix). Joanna Page sums up the opinion of several comics theorists in noting that the fact that comics panels can be viewed in sequence, though not only one sequence, or *in toto*, creates an “excess of signs, texts, and images, continually threatening to dissolve the ordered frames of a neat, linear narrative” (69), making comics both ideally suited for depictions too complex and too volatile for mere verbal enunciation, constituting a medium that anticipates, and trains us for, the mixed-media, image-heavy discourses of our current culture. In this sense, the work of artists such as Carroll that straddle the divide—or maybe enunciate the continuum?—between traditional comics in print and webcomics becomes of particular importance. As the author of “Appreciating Digital Comics through Emily Carroll” notes, Carroll incorporates in her work, in order to maximize the effect of Gothic horror and suspense, the three elements that an online environment adds to typical sequential art.

First, there is “digital movement,” that is, the endless scrolling capacity of a digital screen, as opposed to the finite dimensions of a printed page, thus actually carving on the webpage the sinister “basements, wells, underfloors, pitfalls, caves, tombs and all kinds of holes in the ground” of gothic imagination. Second, there is “digital time,” defined as the capacity of digital “pages” to “all exist simultaneously, distributed along the deep screen” and hence turn time into a “full circle” or a labyrinthine curlicue, enhancing the sense of suspense and uncanny confusion. Finally, there is “digital space” where, in contrast to the defined frame of the comic-book page or panel, we have in fact a series of frames, stable or unstable (computer screen, browser window, “bars, tabs, menus, boxes, widgets and icons”) that make the story “no more than a fragment of

⁴ According to Nelson Goodman, in his 1976 *Languages of Art* (113), the term “autographic” denotes media of representation that cannot have their constituent components altered without altering their character. A novel in different print, or with different illustrations, is still the same novel, hence an “allographic” type of art; but a comic book plot re-illustrated by a different artist, or re-inked, or even with the text form of its word-balloons changed, will be a different work of art.

that interface” and constantly evoke what lies beyond such limits, the metafictionality that makes horror seep chillingly into our reality. All these features are summarily defined by what Scott McCloud in *Reinventing Comics* dubbed the “infinite canvas” (200) of webcomics as opposed to the physical finite canvas of traditional art. McCloud considers whether such innovations enhance or corrupt the medium of sequential art,⁵ bringing about a seminal change to our reading experience, beyond simply the innovations—extremely important and absorbing in their own right—that Computer Assisted Drawing (CAD) software offers artists. I would argue though that what is particularly great about Carroll’s work is not only that she is acutely aware, and a master, of these new capacities, but, as we shall see below, she ingeniously transcends the divide on occasion, bringing elements of her webcomics art into her later transition to print, and thus generating visually and viscerally that effect of a continuum with either beneficial or infected aspects.

Given all the above observations about both the capacity of the hybrid language of comics to express multimodally issues too complex for mere text, and also the quality in webcomics that allows for the actualization of metafictional and clandestine dimensions on an issue, we can see how contemporary comics becomes a superb medium for negotiating thorny questions of postmodern subjectivity. Especially where it concerns the formation of performative gender identity, the influence of comics cannot be overstated: Val Gillies’ research has shown “that identification with an image can sometimes be a more powerful way of capturing emotions associated with it that can be far removed from verbal articulation” (Gillies et al. 201), while, as Alan Moore reveals on his last-page commentary in *Promethea*, “Pentagon studies in the 1980s demonstrated that comic strip narrative is still the best way of conveying understandable and retainable information” (n.p.).

The graphic and fairy-tale-esque realization of woman-identified relationships, therefore, can be taken as highly useful in the formation of a lesbian continuum paradigm, which would explain why “[l]esbian comics and graphic narratives have gained unprecedented cultural presence in the twenty-first century” (Bauer 219), since “the ‘complex visualizations’ afforded by graphic art lend themselves particularly well to addressing ‘tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility’” (Chute, qtd. in Bauer 221). It is precisely this complexity that the two stories chosen here for analysis, “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold” from the *Through the Woods* collection, and a 2011 webcomic from Carroll’s online gallery,⁶ titled “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter,” illustrate. What will be shown is that innovations effected upon the traditional comics medium by emergent technologies, in this case Carroll’s experimentation with the “infinite canvas” and her idiosyncratic blend of bare-bones drawing materials with Photoshop enhancements, offer an excellent conduit for visualizing meaningfully the idea of the continuum in both its infected and beneficent versions. According to Kashtan, “[i]n comics, it is impossible to dissociate the

⁵ See a summary of the debate in Kirchoff and Cook 2-3.

⁶ As the particular tale was removed in 2019 from the artist’s own site, it can only be accessed through secondary (partial) fan and critic repostings. The most complete version available is a scrolled reading of the tale on *YouTube* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CMmhlCDNhc, unfortunately, of low-quality reproduction.

semiotic content of the text from its physical form, or even to imagine the two as separate. Even more generally ... in comics, attention to materiality is the *default* position” (14); hence, the material rendering of the lesbian continuum in either of its forms becomes of particular interest here.

“A Lady’s Hands Are Cold” is a creative retelling of the traditional fairy-tale of Bluebeard, the hegemon who killed his brides when they disobeyed him out of curiosity and opened a locked chamber in his castle, containing the remains of the former brides. Here, the story acquires a woman-identified twist, as it is constructed from the new bride’s perspective, a beautiful young girl who is given by her father to the mysterious lord of a grand mansion. In addition, tragedy comes not from some feminine vice, but in the form of a mysterious haunting lament the young bride seems to hear emanating from the house. Guided by this song, she digs out, one by one, from various locations in the mansion, the dismembered parts of the body belonging to the groom’s first wife, whom he has murdered to usurp her fortune. The young bride ties together the body parts of the former wife, and the corpse is reanimated; however, it attacks and possesses the younger woman, turning her into a living ghost, and singing: “When I’ve torn you to pieces, girl, then I’ll be whole.” The terrified, haunted girl runs away from the mansion, while the reanimated first wife kills the evil husband.

In contrast to this even more gruesome rendition of an already gruesome tale, “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter,” released on Valentine’s Day 2011, is a heart-warmingly beautiful lesbian love story, with a “happily ever after” ending. Its being “so different from the rest of Carroll’s work” is perhaps the reason the artist removed it in 2019 from her webcomics site “without comment,” though fans hail it as “one of the best love stories” (Wejebe). In some unidentifiable, yet authentic-feeling Viking-cum-Native American mythic time, the goddess Anu-Anulan becomes obsessed with the silver-blond hair of a young maiden, identified only as Yir’s daughter, and uses a series of three subterfuges to trick Yir’s daughter into donating her three braids to the goddess’s disguised selves. However, obtaining the hair alone leaves Anu-Anulan unsatisfied, so she visits the girl as herself to understand what is wrong. She finds Yir’s daughter, whose name we now find out is Yorenn, crying because, now that she has given her beautiful hair away, no one will come to visit or stay. Moved by such innocence and goodness, Anu-Anulan takes off her godly mask and leads Yorenn outside, to show her in the night sky the bright full moon, which the goddess has fashioned from the girl’s curled braids. She then takes Yorenn’s hand in a gesture of love and stays. The final panel shows them together in a collage of moments of harmonious domestic bliss that concludes as it has begun, with the two—Yorenn now an old silver-haired lady—moon-gazing and joined in love.

Although the two stories could not seem more dissimilar at first sight, Carroll manages to bring them together not only through her signature art, but in the way she handles the study of gender relations and dynamics in each tale. One way she does that is through her renovation of comics conventions, such as panel division and color, two areas in which her work with new technologies of comics creation has offered her important breakthroughs. If, according to Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (72-74), the gutter between panels is where human

imagination fills in links of causality and sequence, but also narrative is fragmented in identifiable semantic units, Carroll ingeniously both enhances this feature’s joining function and subverts it “by utilising at key moments either an all-black or all-white borderless background for her panels, making the gutter engulf the panel” (Dokou 580). The borderless pitch-blackness that surrounds most of the storytelling panels of the specific story viscerally signals the ominous tar pit of “obscurity that felt like paralysis,” which Gilbert and Gubar identify as the fate of ancestral women’s writing, from which no narrative unit can be detached and remain uninfected (51). In a sense, as it will be shown, in this tale, Carroll uses the tension created by juxtaposing the cut-up unit of the panel or the page with visualizations of a flow (inter- and intra-panel) to depict the effect of a fragmenting and poisonous patriarchy on the beneficent thread of the lesbian continuum. Thus, the artist takes what felt “like a bit of a limitation” in the switch into print medium to her (Dueben) and ingeniously turns that limitation into a signifying agent for the imprisonment of her protagonist.

In “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold,” patriarchy is predominant, inexorable, and panel-divisive: on the first page,⁷ the red “girl” panel in capital letters and the blue “man” panel in small-case letters, juxtaposed, signify a strong antithesis of primary color and gender; the patriarchal spirit is furthermore enhanced by the use of “girl” instead of woman, placing her as a non-adult in a position inferior to the man. Immediately after, the two unequal parties are decisively married in the panel belonging to “the girl’s father who said, You will marry this man,” a patriarchal pronouncement sanctioned by the strategically-placed authoritative Christian cross on the wall. However, the third panel lettering, half in capitals and half in small letters, and the two primary colors, blending to a bloody burgundy, signify the mismatched and fatal nature of this heteronormative institutional act. The man is metonymically signaled throughout by implements and acts of cutting and severing, such as his golden knife (Fig. 1), the hatchet with which he dismembered his wife, and even the straight vertical stripes of his mansion’s wallpaper, functioning both as dividers parallel to the divisions of the action panels and as bars to cage in the lonely young bride. The bride’s perambulations and the layout of the mansion are delivered through small, rigid, and ordered comic panels that seem to restrict movement, or confuse it with their uniformity. Such sequences, however, are interrupted by key narrative moments where the bride or the ghoul take action, and there the mansion appears in single-page giant and engulfing panels, stifling with authority the bride’s attempts at manumission.

⁷ As Emily Carroll’s book has no pagination, none can be provided to identify panels.



Fig. 1. The symbolic dinner scene from "A Lady's Hands Are Cold."

It becomes thus clear that the isolated, prison-like mansion, with its walls stuffed with corpse parts, represents patriarchal society par excellence that cuts off women from the presence of their nurturing, supportive forerunners. Commenting on the mansion and its blue Bluebeard/boy coloring, Horrocks notes,

Because of how color functions in this story, even though the husband is away for most of it, neither we nor our heroine can ever escape his presence. This is his house, and within its blue walls our heroine is trapped. When we finally encounter the *other* woman, the one referred to in the title of the story, we see that her body is blue—both from the coldness of death and because of the role the man played in her life. Not only is blue used to convey a general dark creepiness, but we also now see that it is being used to tell us about a character’s history in shorthand, and to fulfill a functionary role; to show simply that she is cold. These dual levels imbue Carroll’s colors with a thematic and atmospheric complexity that few colorists today can match.

In addition, the very setting of the mansion, beyond its aforementioned allegorical function, serves this idea of the infected continuum, since the labyrinthine structure of the mansion is traditionally a *topos*, inviting the investigation of a map, or enabling a mystery-solving sequence, in the same way as the original Labyrinth invites the solution of Ariadne’s helpful thread. Gilbert and Gubar build upon Ellen Moers’s observations on how, in “female Gothic”:

...heroines who characteristically inhabit mysteriously intricate or uncomfortably stifling houses are often seen as captured, fettered, trapped, even buried alive. But other kinds of works by women—novels of manners, domestic tales, lyric poems—also show the same concern with spatial constrictions . . . imagery of enclosure reflects the woman writer’s own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places. Indeed, it reflects her growing suspicion that what the nineteenth century called “woman’s place” is itself irrational and strange. Moreover . . . imagery of entrapment expresses the woman writer’s sense that she has been dispossessed precisely because she is so thoroughly possessed—and possessed in every sense of the word. (83-84)

Carroll’s graphics underline this dimension in a multimodal way, enabled by her Photoshop-enhanced use of primary colors: “Her desiccated letters stand in contrast to the vibrancy of sumptuous reds, midnight blues and her always smothering blacks. Carroll treats each graphic element (pencils, inks, colors, and letters) as a component of the page. Each bit fits its composition and, oh by the way, serves the story” (Silva). Carroll’s way of depicting the confusing, labyrinthine and infected dimension of the continuum inside the mansion is twofold. On the one hand, she maintains the black-and-blue visual schema throughout, while also inserting little “flowing” motifs—like the bedcover or wallpaper design—inside each panel, thus creating a sense of both imprisoning solidity and uncanny (in the Freudian sense) instability. On the other hand, she also adopts a certain medial extravagance unheard-of by traditional comic creators who need to pack as much action panels in one issue: her one-sentence or one-image cliffhanger panels, transplanted from her webcomic techniques which, in her own words, afford

one “greater control” because “it’s more difficult to ‘flip ahead’ and check for scares,” hence creating “mounting tension” through “the long scrolling” (Smith), compel a suspenseful pace. The technique intensifies the innovation of dispersing the grisly findings of Bluebeard’s original forbidden room—the *telos* of both the story and its heuristic-ideological journey—in many crypts throughout the entire castle, in a game of connect-the-dots (or body parts) that interpret the young bride’s quest as the following of a thread of (sung) clues, and their piecing-together in a new continuum of discovery. Carroll thus creates the sensation that, although we move from physical paper panel to panel, we are also navigating an infinite canvas whose unexplored and unexplorable potential is always relevant and always threatening, a geocultural continuum of new (unpleasant) discoveries. Christine Doyle makes a similar observation when she cites Nadia Crandall’s “Cyberfiction and the Gothic Novel” as reading,

the castle as a metaphor of psychic space, a dream-space or alternate reality, where boundaries are not perceptible and the self may be fragmented, where the alternate reality heightens real-life experience and serves as a locus to explore the forbidden, where often modernity is juxtaposed with antiquity—a space exemplified in modern cybertexts by the virtual reality of the computerized world. (245)

So, even though Carroll observes that “scrolling creates a sort of tension because you reveal things bit by bit as opposed to a page where in your peripheral vision you see the rest of the page” (Hubbard 2), her unifying motifs around and inside panels on the page replicate ingeniously that multidirectional scrolling effect. As a result, the structure here, while theoretically delimiting and imprisoning the female subject, simultaneously acquires a flowing dimension of uncertainty, where there be monsters.

Within this blue labyrinth of cold masculinity, what is left of those female forerunners is a ghostly, haunting lament of betrayal, abuse, and death, which Carroll depicts ingeniously as a literal infected thread of melody flowing vermillion across the black-and-blue panels, like sick blood.



Fig. 2. The haunting song from "A Lady's Hands Are Cold."

The artist here combines "spectrality," which "is especially well-suited to articulating ideas of lesbian invisibility and the capacity of lesbian desire to survive oppression and 'return' in the manner of the Freudian concept of the repressed" (Palmer), with the *écriture féminine* of poetic lamentation, a genre identified with women and, ever since Sophocles' *Antigone*, with resistance

against authority (especially when self-directed); and she does so, moreover, in a novel lettering style which “adds to the sequential flow of the panels” (Schedeen). Carroll’s portrayal of the only melody in this joyless mansion accords with how Julia Kristeva assigns the function of the poetic to the mother, and hence suggests an *a priori* abjection shunned by masculine *logos*:

Rhythm and song hence arouse the impure, the other of mind, the passionate-corporeal-sexual-virile, but they harmonize it, arrange it differently than the wise man’s knowledge does. They thus soothe frenzied outbursts (Plato, in the *Laws*, allowed such use of rhythm and meter only to the mother rocking her child), by contributing an *external* rule, a poetic one, which fills the gap, inherited from Plato, between body and soul. (18)

It is in this vein that one should also translate the lyrics of the lament: “I MARRIED My LOVE in the SPRINGTIME/ BUT by SUMMER HE’D LOCKED ME AWAY./ HE’D MURDERED ME DEAD by the AUTUMN,/ & by WINTER I WAS NAUGHT BUT DECAY.” The circularity of the seasons and hence the possibility of rebirth is here twisted and mocked by the masculine acts of violence and disruption, leading to an undead awakening instead. In depicting the lament, Carroll’s art breaks with the comics convention of word bubbles and their uniform lettering as clearly demarcated from the picture part to convey precisely this inescapable continuity. As Dokou notes,

much attention and praise has been offered by reviewers [like Horrocks or Schedeen] to Carroll’s powerful and unusual lettering style. For about half of the book she does away with the traditional comics bubble, caption or sound effect . . . and instead crafts her text as part of the image, meaningful in its changes of size, colour direction, placement, and font, an immaterial presence in itself akin to a ghost that haunts the page. (576)

Hence, the visual stream of the ghostly song, a thread both formed *as* a sentence and speaking *of* the sentence on the first wife (namely, a hacking-to-pieces and a burial eradication from memory, a sentence that is the very opposite of organic wholeness and continuity), alerts and galvanizes the young bride to action; but it is also a clear visualization of an infected continuum offering not support but despair over such inescapable victimization, since the moment the severed head of the ghoul completes the song with “until I am whole once again,” the young bride’s eyes begin to become like those of the corpse, a process completed by the final rendition of the song, where the ghoul attacks the bride—in song and body. As Gilbert and Gubar claim about infected sentences, “pernicious ‘guests’ and ‘ghosts’ inhabit all literary texts. For any reader, but especially for a reader who is also a writer, every text can become a ‘sentence’ or weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare” (52). Not to mention that the young bride’s duty is to put together an actual corpse, the very opposite of the fertile bodies of the couple she should normally be concerned with. “The corpse,” according to Kristeva, “seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life Imaginary uncanniness and

real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). This is precisely the essence of Carroll’s brand of horror, since, according to Karen Coats’s review, she is noted for “her frank depictions of figures whose bodily boundaries have been breached by supernatural invaders” (149). Carroll’s choice then to have a corpse be the medium *and* the message of Bluebeard’s secret, and not just the horror of the *dénouement* inside the locked chamber, may serve as both a feminist *caveat* and a comment on the situation women creators face when trying to resurrect their vocational ancestresses: one often has to work with dead, and very angry, materials.



Fig. 3. The dead first wife is reanimated as a hostile ghoul in “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold.”

The infected continuum is equally manifest in the young bride’s key accessories: first, the ruby-and-pearl choker given to her by her husband, whose shape and stones signify both the mark of decapitation and asphyxiating enslavement that is the lot of women in Bluebeard’s mansion, and the tears shed by those victims. The choker, which belonged to the first wife and indicated her—potentially munificent, but now usurped and twisted—riches, is significantly cut by the reanimated wife when she attacks the girl, signaling the severing of marital chokehold, but also the severing of any endowing continuum between the two. Second, there is the red ribbon the girl

uses to tie the dismembered parts together, in color like the infected bloody stream of the lament, which appears as an act of sisterhood towards the first wife: indeed, it is only after the corpse is tied together again that she can be reanimated, sing her full lament, claim a new wholeness, and kill her evil husband. The signature use of a computer-enhanced red/vermillion thread throughout the text, as well as the gradual transformation of the bride's angelic eyes suggests an affinity of the comics artist with literary foremothers—Charlotte Brontë and her “madwoman” first and foremost—who see the monster as internalized oppression: “From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects—Gorgons, Sirens, Scyllas, serpent-Lamias, Mothers of Death or Goddesses of Night. But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation” (Gilbert and Gubar 79).

So, what exactly goes wrong here, and the murdered wife turns against the girl too? Gilbert and Gubar observe that what infects the women's continuum is the interjection of the male “reading” of women that colors those bonds as pernicious (49). In the present story too, although the two wives in a manner help each other escape their patriarchal prison, there is no love lost between them because the first wife's love is all reserved, albeit in a twisted form, for the master: the incessant haunting wail that infects the girl's consciousness “until the girl's insides were clotted with cold heartache” is what prompts the bride to “unearth” her vanished forerunner, while the ghoul's actions are motivated purely by jealousy and hatred against her husband, whom she loved body, soul, *and* purse. In other words, what is missing from the continuum is the *lesbian* element, the unmediated affection or direct link between women that Rich visualizes. This lack extends in the potential relationship of the young bride with the mansion's maids, who in many a novel or play have helped forge a continuum of mutual enablement: all we see of the handmaids are a couple of hands (metonymically referring to brainless servitude) and a response serving the master's purposes, a fully co-opted femininity that cannot, and will not, stop the abuse. The master's presence in all cases functions as a distortive mediator, a dark lens through which the continuum is refracted, as visually attested by how, in an act of further perversion, he has buried the severed arms of his first wife in a linked and twisted position, violently creating and physically/semantically infecting the continuum activated by the discovery. That is why the story does not truly conclude, but returns visually and verbally to mock its first-page triage of panels: “There was a girl” “And there was a man,” yes, but now their lettering is reversed and instead of a man we have the haunted young bride receding, panel by panel, into ghostliness. The evil of her man has been inscribed into her, so even if the male is invisible, we visualize the blue infection of the patriarchal trauma.



Fig. 4. The husband's murder and the young bride's escape/vanishing in "A Lady's Hands Are Cold."

Accordingly, the final "father" panel in the original sequence is replaced by "and there was a lady with cold hands," suggesting that the immersion of the girl into a matrilineal continuum is, still, the same "low, lonely" winding road that led her there, marked by the bluish cold absence of love, and can only haunt her ever after. Hence, it signals the inescapability of the patriarchal malaise which dictates that "[i]t is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are

warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (Gilbert and Gubar 53). One finds this panel recalling Kristeva’s words on our complex relation with the mother as the ultimate source of abjection, which may well extend to our foremothers in general:

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. (13)

Furthermore, the final repetition of the stock fairy-tale phrase, “there was a . . .” without, however, its prerequisite qualifier, “once upon a time,” underscores the visual point that this is not a kind of horror safely ensconced in the past, but a tale that continues to wind its way to the modern storyteller and reader. As Coats remarks, Carroll’s “tales are all delightfully ambiguous in their endings, forcing reader investment to bring about closure in a technique that practically guarantees that fan-pleasing *frisson* will last beyond the closing of the book” (149). The young wife stitching the corpse together stands as the avatar of every woman creator that dips into the female tradition for inspiration so as to craft her own tale, only to find these gifts tragically compromised and the continuum a bloody, jagged and chocking stream that infects and haunts all partakers. The medium may be new, but the infection translates and, if anything, is made more graphic by virtue of the hybrid nature of sequential art.

Against that infected continuum, “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter” tells a story of female bonding of mythical dimensions, as it leads in the creation of the moon—traditionally, a symbol of femininity in folklore (Grimal 407). Initially, though, we see this bonding imperiled: the goddess, whose divine power simulates the prerogatives of patriarchy and “occupies a typically male role,” as Rachael Ryerson shows (55), signified by Carroll in vivid “boy’s” blue, objectifies Yir’s daughter—dressed in Carroll’s “woman” color, bright red—as simply a blonde. Anu-Anulan’s desire translates as selfish possessiveness, and this is also why we do not initially see the face of Yir’s daughter, or hear her name, as if her personality did not register, only her shapely body or silvery hair. The goddess’s three transformations accordingly refract aspects of traditional femininity, which Anu-Anulan tricks Yir’s daughter into interpellating: the nesting crow and the little girl signal motherhood, while the armed warrior a violent masculinity.



Fig. 5. Anu-Anulan’s first deception in “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter.”

Hence, if the long silvery braids are here the visual metaphor for the beneficent lesbian bond, that beneficence is shorn off Yir’s daughter, and sacrificed to a heteronormative set of functions that leave her lonely and crying.

However, there is an element escaping heteronormative economy here, and “disidentifies,” as Ryerson shows, the fairy-tale into a tale of queer love told in a queer format: the goddess’s dawning awareness of her true feelings for the girl. Anu-Anulan’s desire transgresses not only the human-mortal divide, which in myth is often a serious taboo, but also the gender divide:

Anu-Anulan presents as genderqueer, performing as both masculine and feminine and her blurring of gender boundaries is multimodal. Her masculine appearance is accompanied by female pronouns This contrast requires several modes—the visual, the linguistic,

the spatial, the gestural—to create a moment where gender norms are troubled and undermined; this an example of queer multimodality in action. (56)

This divine queerness, transcending the gender binary, apparently, cannot be satisfied by the traditional patriarchy-infected exchange economy of woman as soulless adornments: the hair, unreasonably, loses its softness and lustre when taken from the girl, suggesting that there is something more, something not-visualized, which Anu-Anulan truly desires. Hence, she graduates from a desire that is rapacious, exploitative in the manner of heteronormative relations (or relations between gods and humans), and dissembling, to a desire for sustainable and sustaining mutual affection, that which Rich would define, and Carroll depicts, as lesbian. It is in search of that yet-unidentified emotion that the goddess descends on earth “as herself,” discovers the girl’s kind heart, learns that her name is Yorenn, and engages her without her mask on, that is, without a distortive divine/patriarchal filter.



Fig. 6. Anu-Anulan reveals herself to Yorenn in “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter.”

In staying, Anu-Anulan acknowledges a novel emotion, love: we are told she was “moved,” same as Yorenn was “moved” the three times she gave away her braids: hence the goddess completes an affective continuum between the human and the divine symbolized now by the moonlight, woven of Yorenn’s hair, and by the linked hands of the two lovers, eloquently juxtaposed to the chopped-off braided arms of Bluebeard’s wife.

Accordingly, this time, the story does not turn upon itself in a sterile vicious cycle, but the moonlight rays and linked hands become the final panel’s motif that depict an ideal version of the lesbian continuum in a “big rhapsodic climax” (Collins) set upon an infinite canvas: a silvery moonlight thread surrounds the women like a protective halo; circumscribes a continuum of images of domestic lesbian bliss with lots of connective images like linked hands and arms, embraces, and spooning depicted multimodally, “though facial expressions, body language, gestures, and images collaged together” (Ryerson 57); and ends in a “happily ever after” image of Yorenn coupled even more tightly with Anu-Anulan, with her long silvery braid grown back into fullness.

The loving moments, moreover, are not set in separate, ordered panels (as the mansion sequences in “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold”) but are irregular in shape, rectangular or softly wavy and curliqued, all circumscribed and lit-up by the same silvery thread, and all partially superimposed upon one another, forming an actual continuum of the narrative. Set upon the infinitely-expanding space of the black webpage canvas, those moments shine bright like a moon at night reflected on water, an idea suggested by the almost-identical images of Yorenn and the goddess sketched in the beginning and the end of the sequence as embracing in a silvery-blue glow. The image eloquently tells us that it is the love between those two women that creates the moon, its roundness and soft glow reflecting the fullness and warmth of their life together. Thus, the sequence allows one to visualize *and* mythologize the nurturing, beneficent continuum akin to how Rich imagined it: “Woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power,” bearing “the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes to liberate ourselves and each other*” (657). The transcending potential of this energy, symbolized in the story not only by its origins—moonlight, and Anu-Anulan’s divine power descended on earth—but by its diachronic spreading along the infinite canvas tableau at the end, aligns with the conception of the lesbian continuum as “that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,’ and in the sharing of work” (Rich 650). As the artist herself says, “I also wanted to show that it’s not just a single sweeping romantic gesture that makes a love story, it’s also the everyday moments (like having a meal, or taking a walk, or just having a laugh together) that can mean just as much” (Collins).



Fig. 7. The final “happily ever after” “infinite canvas” collage of “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter.”

The subtle signs of Yorenn’s ageing, then, only intensify the beauty of this continuum, as they signal growth and progress against the repetitiveness of trauma in the previous story, and

also daub the white hair of old age with the same luminous meaningfulness of the earlier fetishized silver braid. The inevitable associations of aging with death and parting, are contained, in a sense, not only by the circularity and caul-like thread of the moonbeam, but also by the use of the “infinite canvas” technique enabled by the webcomics medium: this was one of the rare times where the artist used “the ‘infinite canvas’ to convey a positive emotion like love while much of [her] other work has used it to evoke fear” (Collins). This particular instant could be said to counter, through the beneficent continuum, a further feminine concern other than loneliness and homophobia: the feminine discomfort with one’s body under prescribed beauty norms. As Carroll admitted in a Toronto International Festival of Authors interview, “I have, like anyone else, a lot of struggles with my body, and negotiating the perception of it, publicly and privately, can be an unsettling experience for me. It’s frightening to rely so completely on a vessel that we don’t even entirely understand, and which can change and surprise us at anytime” (“Discussing Body Horror . . .”). Like the chubby catwoman who prevails over the supermodel-like seductive female vampire in *When I Arrived at the Castle*, this aged beauty offers a message of empowering engagement with the female body.

The line, finally, of the continuum forms an hourglass symbol of infinity, perfect and whole in itself, suggesting that this relationship endures because it is not trespassed upon or interrupted by any outside patriarchal influence: the two women are complete in one another. It should be noted at this point that the objections mentioned by Ryerson about the conformity of the couple to happy monogamy reflecting “heteronormative values over radical, queer values” (58) is forestalled by Carroll’s insertion into the queerly multimodal infinite canvas collage of even greater queerness: there is one panel where Anu-Anulan is seen “nesting” in a cave of ice materialized inside their home, like a polar bear, with a cloaked Yorenn spreading warm blankets beside her. It is a nod towards mythic divinity that often appears zoomorphic, but also towards a queerness that infiltrates domestic routine in fun and unpredictable ways. The artist’s blend of webcomics technology with lesbian-identified symbolism becomes in this way paradigmatic of Bauer’s comment that “[c]omics enable what we might call, reappropriating Adrienne Rich’s words, a ‘graphic lesbian continuum’: a way of looking queerly at the world that takes lesbian lives and experiences as the starting point for drawing new lines across space and time, culture and politics” (229).

In conclusion, Carroll’s blend of new technologies and folklore in the two stories depicts effectively both the positive and the negative potential of the lesbian continuum, at the same time proving “the importance of ‘visual languages’ in stitching together the sociocultural fabric of social-psychological experiences and embodied ways of being” (Gillies et al. 201). The decisive variable in each case appears to be the existence or not of direct affection—of any sort—between the women, a formula offering hope in the face of past infections, but also present challenges.

Works Cited

- “Appreciating Digital Comics through Emily Carroll.” *Graphic Policy*, 23 Nov. 2015, graphicpolicy.com/tag/anu-anulan-yirs-daughter/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2020.
- Bauer, Heike. “Comics, Graphic Narratives, and Lesbian Lives.” *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, edited by Jodie Medd. Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 219-235.
- Carroll, Emily. “A Lady’s Hands Are Cold.” *Through the Woods*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2014.
- . “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter.” *emcarroll.com*, 14 Feb. 2011, emcarroll.com/comics/anu/page01.html. Accessed 12 Feb. 2017.
- . “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter.” *YouTube*, uploaded by LEC 743, 22 May 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CMmhlCDNhc. Accessed 9 Aug. 2020.
- . *When I Arrived at the Castle*. Koyama Press, 2019.
- Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. Gollancz, 1979.
- Chute, Hillary L. “Decoding Comics (Review).” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no.4, Winter 2006, pp. 1014-1027.
- Coats, Karen. “Fairy Tale Comics ed. by Chris Duffy (Review).” *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*, vol.67, no. 3, Nov. 2013, p. 149.
- Collins, Sean T. “Say Hello—Emily Carroll!” *The Comics Journal*, 8 July 2011, www.tcj.com/emily-carroll/. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass. The U of Chicago P, 1978.
- “Discussing Body Horror and Inspiring Women with Emily Carroll.” *Toronto International Festival of Authors*, 4 Mar. 2019, festivalofauthors.ca/2019/blog/discussing-body-horror-and-inspiring-women-with-emily-carroll. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Dokou, Christina. “Un(th)inkable Tales: Unimaginable Folklore Horror in Emily Carroll’s *Through the Woods*.” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 8, no.6, 2017, pp. 572-587.
- Doyle, Christine. “Contemporary Hauntings.” *Children’s Literature* vol. 36, 2008, pp. 244-250.
- Dueben, Alex. “Emily Carroll Walks ‘Through the Woods.’” *Comic Books Review*. *CBR.com*, 21 Aug. 2014, www.cbr.com/emily-carroll-walks-through-the-woods/. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. Yale UP, 1979.
- Gillies, Val, Angela Harden, Katherine Johnson, Paula Reavey, Vicky Strange, and Carla Willig. “Painting Pictures of Embodied Experience: The Use of Nonverbal Data Production for the Study of Embodiment.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 2, 2005, pp. 199-212.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art*. Hackett, 1976.
- Grimal, Pierre. *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, edited by Stephen Kernshaw. Translated by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop. Penguin, 1992.

- Horrocks, Sarah. “Beautiful Horror: Emily Carroll’s *Through the Woods* Is a Comics Masterwork.” *Comics Alliance*, 26 Aug. 2014, comicsalliance.com/emily-carroll-through-the-woods-review/. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Hubbard, Taryn. “An Interview with Emily Carroll: A Fairy-Tale Teller in the Digital Age.” *Room: Literature, Art and Feminism since 1975*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2016, p. 2, roommagazine.com/interview/interview-emily-carroll-fairy-tale-teller-digital-age. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Kashtan, Aaron. *Between Pen and Pixel: Comics, Materiality, and the Book of the Future*. The Ohio State UP, 2018.
- Kirchoff, Jeffrey S.J., and Mike P. Cook, editors. *Perspectives on Digital Comics: Theoretical, Critical and Pedagogical Essays*. McFarland and Company, 2019.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives. Columbia UP, 1982.
- McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 2000.
- . *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.
- Moore, Alan, author, and J. H. Williams III, illustrator. *Promethea, Book 5*. WildStorm, 2006.
- Page, Joanna. *Science Fiction in Argentina*. Dicitalculturebooks, U of Michigan P, 2016.
- Palmer, Paulina. “Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions.” *FazendoGênero 9: Diásporas, Diversidades, Deslocamentos* Conference, 23-26 Aug. 2010, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Portugal. Lecture. *fg2010*, www.fg2010.wwc2017.eventos.dype.com.br/resources/anais/1279202039_ARQUIVO_PaulinaPalmer.pdf. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, Summer, 1980, pp. 631-660.
- Ryerson, Rachael. “Disidentification, Disorientation and Disruption: Queer Multimodal Rhetoric in Queer Comics.” *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, vol. 3, no. 1, Special Issue: Comics and/as Rhetoric, Spring 2019, pp. 49-67.
- Schedeen, Jesse. “Graphic Novel Review: *Through the Woods*.” *IGN*, 16 Jan. 2015, www.ign.com/articles/2015/01/16/graphic-novel-review-through-the-woods. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Sexton, Anne. *Transformations*. Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
- Silva, Keith. “Through The Woods’ Delivers Timeless Horror.” *Comics Bulletin*, 30 Oct. 2014, comicsbulletin.com/woods/. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.
- Smith, Zack. “SPX Countdown: Emily Carroll Takes Us *Through the Woods*.” *Newsrama*, 10 Sept. 2014, www.newsarama.com/22092-spx-countdown-emily-carroll-takes-us-through-the-woods.html. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.
- Thompson, Craig. “*Through the Woods*: Amazon.co.uk: Carroll, Emily: 9781442465954: Books: Review.” *Amazon.co.uk*, www.amazon.co.uk/Through-Woods-Emily-Carroll/dp/1442465956. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.

- Varnum, Robin, and Christina Gibbons. *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*. Studies in Popular Culture. UP of Mississippi, 2007.
- Walker, Barbara G. *Feminist Fairy Tales*. HarperOne, 1996.
- Wejebe, Alyssa. "A Lost Comic? Remembering Emily Carroll's 'Anu-Anulan and Yir's Daughter.'" *Goomba Stomp & Sordid Cinema*, 21 Nov. 2019, goombastomp.com/a-lost-comic-remembering-emily-carrolls-anu-anulan-and-yirs-daughter/. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.